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Spring 2006

When It's Bad Cess to Assess!

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Freyman, Jay, "When It's Bad Cess to Assess!" (2006). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -- Online Archive*. 11.

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When It's Bad Cess¹ to Assess!

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It seems to me that efforts at outcome assessment in higher education are deficient because of a failure to understand what exactly it is that is being or should be assessed. Certainly, the object of such assessment should not be what, if anything, the student has learned in courses; grades for course work, grade inflation notwithstanding, should suffice to tell that tale.

Some years ago, one state legislature termed the object of higher-education assessment efforts to be "value added." When I heard this, I immediately thought of the VAT prevailing in many countries. From the time when a raw material enters the process of being transformed into a finished product, an assessment is made of the value added to the product at each stage in that process; and a tax is imposed on the sum of the values added at the various stages. This value added tax is paid by the purchaser. I conjured up the image of students as just so many chunks of raw material which take on more and more form and utility (value) at the intellectual hands of craftsmen/professors as they pass along the assembly line of the courses which constitute their college curricula.

Such quantifiable objects of assessment do not, I suggest, provide a direct indication of whether or not an academic program is being successful. In our rage for the instant results that we seem to see quantification providing, we may accept them as an indirect indication of that success. But I submit that in so doing we are deluding ourselves about both the appropriate object and the appropriate method of the assessment being sought.

If Bruce Kimball is accurate in his book *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* that civic responsibility is a common goal of most, if not all, academic programs of liberal education, then what higher education is about is the production or, if it is already there, the encouragement of such responsibility. Is that goal of civic responsibility to be considered properly just one objective of liberal education, or is it to be considered the goal? I take as text the dictum expressed by Aristotle in his *Politics* "*Ho anthrōpos physei politicon zōon*." While in popular parlance the meaning of this statement is usually expressed in the words "Man is a political animal," I maintain that the following rendition is much more accurate to Aristotle's meaning: "The human being is by nature a civic animal" in which the term "civic" is to be taken as having also the connotation of the term "civil." It is fair, I think, to argue that, under this construction of Aristotle's sentiment, civic responsibility is a goal ulterior to any of the other goals usually enunciated for liberal education, i.e., any formal intellectual exercise in which a person engages is ultimately aimed at making him/her a productive

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "cess" has been used both as a clip of "success" and as a misspelled clip of "assess." In the former case, it means "luck" or "fortune" as in the phrase "bad cess to" = "bad luck to" or "a pox upon." In the second case, it means "assess." The term provides, in the present circumstances, quite a fortuitous pun.

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and contributory member of a *polis* (city-state or entity defined in geographical and social terms).

Honors education is about the culture of philosopher/citizens who are more acute than most people in their productivity for and in their contributions to the *polis*. Such individuals have a higher consciousness and a deeper understanding of why they are doing what they do and thus are more fit to guide the *polis* in its day-to-day business or, in a democratic *polis*, to be watchful of those who actually perform that guidance.

Now, it is clear that academic assessment as it is currently practiced is at best aiming at examining short-term results which, it is assumed, are the appropriate indirect indications of success toward the ultimate goal. Current assessment, then, is no more or less than a predictive, indirect measurement of what higher education should really be about, i.e., it is a kind of crystal ball. It presumes to measure what students have learned and not how they have learned to use it. Can you imagine the same legislature which spoke of value added requiring the assessment of the morality of college graduates? The achievement of the real goal of higher education is something that can become evident only over the long term when we can see whether that education has produced a civically responsible individual.

Admittedly, a long-term outlook is impractical in our age of instant gratification that seems to evidence a strange mix of guarantee-requiring and risk-taking. The student says, "If I am going to put out \$15,000+ a year for four or four-plus years for a college education, I want to be darned sure that I am, immediately on graduation, going to get my money's worth in the form of a highly remunerative professional/occupational position," which is the type of thing Linda Frost describes. The established professional who should know better says, "We have to show immediate bang for all the bucks we have been putting into this space program, so let's get this turkey off the ground and not worry too much about those pieces of foam that keep getting torn off after launch." As Linda Frost indicates, however, honors education is means-oriented instead of end-infatuated.

The honors educator has the patience to wait for twenty or so years to find out whether what (s)he thought was a good idea at the time proves to have been so at the voting machines, in the soup kitchens, in the clean or polluted air, etc., of the future. The fifth century BCE Greek historian Herodotus reports that the Athenian lawgiver Solon advised Croesus, the King of Lydia, to assess no one's happiness until his/her life has been completed; Solon could afford to do this, for he was going to leave Croesus' capital shortly thereafter. Honors education is stuck in circumstances in which there seems to be an increasing demand for immediate assessment of that which is not immediately assessable. Honors education has, I believe, two contributions of value to make in the discussion of assessment: an understanding of how long it takes to realize the true goal of higher education; and the patience to wait to assess that realization at the appropriate time, meanwhile simply doing the best we can as reason dictates.

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